A HISTORY OF THE TOWN OF

CHEEKTOWAGA

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Tollgate on Broadway east of Union Road.

by Julia Boyer Reinstein

To know and understand Cheektowaga, a person has to know something of its topography. The town contains about 30 square miles within an area that is roughly six miles square. Its height above sea level varies from 596 feet at Clinton Street near Harlem Road, to 720 feet at the ridge just north of Cleveland Drive and west of Cayuga Road.

Cheektowaga has three drainage basins: Ellicott Creek which drains the northern part of the town and empties into Tonawanda Creek; Scajaquada Creek which drains the central and northern part of the town and flows from Lancaster, east into the Niagara River; and Cayuga Creek which crosses Cheektowaga at Transit Road, draining the southern part of the town.

The geography of Cheektowaga as it has developed, has influenced the history of the town to a great extent. It is crossed, from east to west, by four of the five railroads which serve Buffalo. Three main east-west highways and three main north-south highways have tended to cut the town into pockets of occu-

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pation. The New York State Thruway and the eastern end of the Kensington Expressway have further cut the town. Although today these cuts do not seem of importance, in the earlier periods they had great influence.

Millions of years ago, the rocks over the land began to sink and the waters swept in. As particles in the water settled, many of the important mineral deposits were started, such as the salt and gypsum beds of Western New York, and the Medina and Niagara Limestone belts. Cheektowaga's history might be said to start at this time, for the huge limestone deposits which underlay the town have contributed to its growth and importance.

During the Ice Age, a mile thick glacier crept down from the north. It covered all of New York State, except the tops of the highest mountains, and extended into the row of present counties that border on Pennsylvania. Erie County was completely covered, except for the present Cattaraugus Creek Valley, which became a drainage basin for the melting edge of the glacier in its final retreat.

Cheektowaga's quarries have opened up the secrets of the earth, by exposing layer after layer of stone which represents the epochs of geologic history. Fossils from the simple trilobites and ferns to early fish skeletons can be found in the rocks. The top layer of limestone, which underlays the relatively thin soil layer shows the glacial scratches of the Ice Age, indicating the northeast to southwest movement of the ice layers.

Cheektowaga was once again covered by water and the sediment probably produced the relatively thin layer of fine, sandy, loam soil which covers most of the town. This soil, relatively rock free, provided fine farm lands for the early redman and the later white settlers.

Today, farmers harvest crops over the sites of the early villages of the Indians of Western New York. Cities cover their burying grounds. Trucks and automobiles travel on roads which follow their trails. Lakes, waterways, towns, and streets in cities bear Indian names. It was not until after 1700, that Seneca villages of any permanence were set up in Erie County. The Indian word for Cheektowaga came into existence through the conquest of the Senecas over the Eries. "Ji-ik-do-wah-gah" comes from the Erie into the Seneca language with a translation "land (or place) of the crabapple." The native hawthorne is the "crabapple" which the Indians meant. There are still thousands of these bushes or small trees in the fields of the town today.

In the early 1700's, the Senecas established a village on the north side of Cayuga Creek. Its name was "Ga-sko-sa-da," meaning Falls Village. The name refers to the two falls that are in Cayuga Creek in the central part of Cheektowaga. Indian villages, if they were not palisaded, usually stretched on both sides of a trail. As the land became worn out from the crude farming methods, the village would be moved a few hundred feet. Such was the case of Ga-sko-sa-da. It was located from what is now Transit Road to William Street in a period of less than 100 years. The rich bottom lands of the Cayuga provided rich farm soil, and the forest provided trees for the building of long houses. When the Buffalo Creek Indian Reservation was established, this village disappeared, but the Indians still used the trail along the north bank, on the top of the low ledge which today is where the community of Bellevue is located.

In 1793, a group of Dutch businessmen bought Western New York. These men called themselves the Holland

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Land Company and hired Theopolis Cazenove to be their agent in Philadelphia. Cazenove hired Joseph Ellicott to survey this purchase, so that accurate maps could be used in selling the land. With a number of survey crews, Ellicott first cut a transit line from Lake Ontario to the Pennsylvania border. He had about 130 men, working in teams, cutting strips through the forest, straight north and south, six rods wide, for surveyors to use. From the east transit line he had parallel range lines cut and surveyed, six miles apart. These lines were numbered from east to west. When all of these range lines were surveyed and mapped, the crews started to cut and survey township lines, six miles apart, from east to west, and parallel to the already surveyed Pennsylvania-New York border. These lines were numbered from south to north. It took him about four years to survey the area, dividing it into townships and mapping watercourses and existing trails and small squatters' communities. Later the big townships were surveyed into greater lots, one mile square so that land sales could be made easier. In addition to this, he laid out roads, had them cut through the forests, so that settlers could get to the parts of the Holland Purchase. The first of these roads to be laid out and made useable was known as Batavia Road, which led from the little village of New Amsterdam near the mouth of Buffalo River in a near straight line to Batavia and on east. Batavia Road cut through central present Cheektowaga.

To the little village of Buffalo came a young man from Suffield, Connecticut, by the name of Appollos Hitchcock. In 1809, he purchased land from the Holland Company on both sides of Batavia Road, running south to the north boundary of the Buffalo Creek Indian Reservation, about eight miles from Buffalo. Thus, Cheektowaga had its first permanent resident. He built a log cabin on the creek flats west of present Borden Road, and planted grain on the abandoned Indian fields of the old Indian village. Later, he built a new frame residence near the south end of Dick Road at Broadway, where the railroad underpass is today. His home was razed when this underpass was constructed in the 1920's.

Hitchcock became a most successful business man, purchased more acreage, had the first sawmill and successful gristmill and distillery in what is present Cheektowaga. These were all located in the Broadway area between Dick Road and Borden Road of today. As his children married he provided each with property in that area and built homes for them. Three of these homes survive today, on the south side of Broadway between Indian Road and Borden Road. For many years Hitchcock was the Indian Agent for the Buffalo Creek Indian Reservation. His distillery had been for the purpose of converting the Indian's surplus corn into liquor, which was more salable in eastern New York than dried corn. Present Dick Road-Cayuga Road was called the Whiskey Road because of this distillery. To early residents in Cheektowaga, that road was called the Williamsville Road.

Almost immediately, others bought land near this Batavia Road. Growth was slow until the migration of Germans to this part of New York State about 1826. Elnathan Bennet built a home-tavern on what is present Walden Avenue in 1816. All through the early history of the area the names of Dunn, Campbell, Ely, Durringer, Stock, Croell, Pfohl, Zurbrick, Warner, Vaughn, Coatsworth, Rowely, Zimmerman, and Beach will be found on land purchases, businesses, and more recently, streets of what is now Cheektowaga. It was a time for these

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people who first lived in log cabins and later built better frame or brick homes.

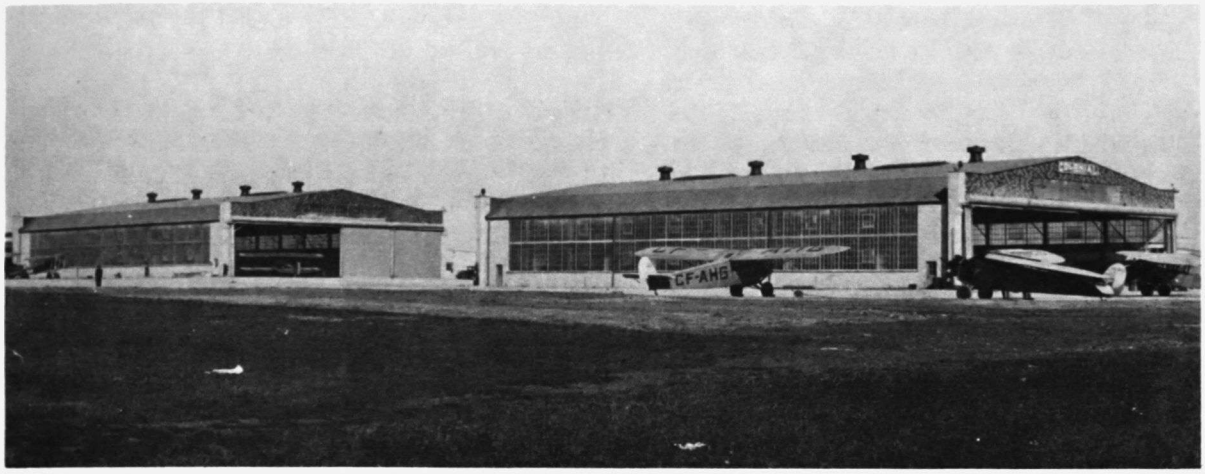
A number of sawmills sprang up on Ellicott and Cayuga Creeks. The second was that of the Ely family on Cayuga Creek in what is the present community of Bellevue. One mill lasted a number of years on Ellicott Creek near Sugg Road. There was even one on Slate Bottom Creek, north of French Road. Maps of mid-19th century indicate a fulling mill, bone mill, cheese factory, many blacksmith shops, and steam sawmills sprinkled over the town, most situated close to Broadway.

In 1802, all of the Holland Land Company area was made into Genesee County, with Batavia as its county seat. In 1808, Niagara County was formed from Genesee County. It extended from Lake Ontario to the Cattaraugus Creek and had three large towns in it, Cambria (present Niagara County), Clarence, and Willink. These two towns had their dividing line through the middle of the Buffalo Creek Indian Reservation. Thus, present Cheektowaga was part of the town of Clarence. People continued to settle on both sides of the Indian Reservation. Present Genesee Street became known as the Plank Road. A plank road broke from Batavia Road at Union Road and was constructed east through Lancaster towards Alden. Both of these were toll roads and remained as such into the 20th Century. Only Indian trails connected across the Reservation until its sale in 1842. In 1821, the large towns of Clarence and Willink became Erie County. Niagara County took Lockport for its new county seat, while Erie County retained Buffalo as its headquarters.

Farmers in the southern part of Amherst (present Cheektowaga) chafed at the taxes levied to improve the roads and schools in the sections near present Main Street. Almost immediately after settlement, school districts were established in present Cheektowaga. The first school was taught by Mrs. Appollos Hitchcock in her own home. Then a log school was constructed near Broadway at the trail which led to Williamsville. Successive structures were built on the same site. At the corner of Maryvale and Cayuga Roads is the site of the schools which served the second school district of the town. The service building for the cemetery on Union Road, near Huth Road, was the 20th century school which grew into the Cleveland Hill School System of District Three.

In the middle 1830's, the Hitchcocks, Elys, Vaughns, and Bennets complained bitterly to the Amherst Town Board about road and fence conditions. So it was on March 22, 1839, through the efforts of Alexander Hitchcock, the son of Appollos, that the New York State Legislature separated the southern part of Amherst from the balance, and Cheektowaga came into being with its northern, eastern, and western boundaries as they are today. In 1839, the southern boundary went to the middle of the Indian Reservation, or about where the Cazinovia Creek is today. It was not until April of that year that the first Town Board meeting was held in the tavern of Elnathan Bennet, on Walden Avenue. Alexander Hitchcock was chosen the town's first Supervisor.

Mr. Hitchcock was well chosen. He had become a very successful businessman, influential churchman, and was a close friend of DeWitt Clinton's and other local and state politicians. During the war scare of the War of 1812, when the British burned Buffalo, he had established and trained a company of militia to protect the settlers in his vicinity. He was also the Indian Agent, succeeding his father.



Buffalo Airport in 1930.

Agriculture was most important in Erie County for many years. The farmers, in clearing their land could make potash from burning trash logs and branches. This gave them their earliest "money crop" to buy the few things they could not produce. Barter was the accepted form of business. With the huge hemlock forests to furnish bark, many tanneries sprang up. Gristmills and sawmills were on nearly every creek. Small limestone quarries were opened up, so that lime could be burned in kilns to make cement. There were three of these small quarries on the north bank of the Cayuga Creek between Union Road and Rowely Road. Many farmers cleared small areas of their land to cut out limestone for rough foundations of barns and homes.

With the construction of the 363 miles of the Erie Canal in 1825, farmers could sell produce more readily. That was when the Hitchcock distillery was constructed. At least 100 German Protestants bought land from the Holland Land Company in the late 1820's and the 1830's and helped to make Cheektowaga become a leading agricultural town of Erie County.

In 1842, the Buffalo Creek Indian Reservation was sold by the Senecas, and land speculators opened up the area for sale. Under the leadership of Christain Metz, who with three others had come to western New York to look for a new home for a splinter group of Lutherans, the Society of the True Inspiration successfully established themselves in Cheektowaga. In early 1843, 5000 acres were purchased at about $10.00 per acre. Despite hardships, the groups settled in three villages in southern Cheektowaga - in what is now Gardenville and Ebenezer as well as close to Transit Road. They were called Ebenezers. Many frowned upon their communal beliefs and practices, but none excelled in their craftsmanship of farming. The first true winter onion, known as the Ebenezer onion, was developed by Society farmers in early Cheektowaga. The elders feared that their closeness to the evils of the city of Buffalo might have a bad influence on the community's young people. About the time of the Civil War, the entire Society migrated to Amana, Iowa, after selling its property.

With the close religious association of the Ebenezer communities in the south-

ern part of Cheektowaga, it was no surprise that they in turn sought to establish a town encompassing their purchases. So in 1851, the New York State Legislature created the Town of Seneca, from the southern third of Cheektowaga, and the northern parts of Hamburg and present Orchard Park. Today, all that remains in Cheektowaga of the old Buffalo Indian Reservation is that section from William Street and near Strasmer Road of present Cheektowaga.

The arrival of steam railroad transportation into western New York helped to change parts of rural Cheektowaga into more heavily populated areas. In the 1840's rights-of-way were purchased across central Cheektowaga for the present New York Central railroad and the Erie Railroad. In 1851, the Erie succeeded in running its first train across New York State. By the end of the Civil War, four railroads crossed the town, and northern and southern Cheektowaga started to develop in separate manners.

During the 1880's and 1890's it might be said that the railroad age hit Cheektowaga. Near the city line the New York Central had its railroad yards. In Cheektowaga at the city line the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western maintained its large freight yards. Many families established themselves in newly created subdivisions that had come into existence in the Walden, Broadway, and William Streets sections.

At about this same time, Polish and German Catholic immigrants settled in Cheektowaga, through the efforts of the Diocese of Buffalo, which was instrumental in establishing some of Cheektowaga's early churches. The influence of the pastors of these churches tended to establish "pockets" of ethnic groups which today are still recognized as areas of "the Chapel," or "Walden," or "the orphanage" area, as well as the earlier "Pine Hill" section of the town. "Forks" was the center of road transportation, for Broadway, Walden Avenue, Union Road and the New York Central Railroad met there. Rural Cheektowaga still had many Yankee and early German farmers. One of the largest landowners was the Winspear-Urban family which had owned land in Cheektowaga since the 1840's. By the 1880's, the Urbans had become landed gentry and a great influence in the town. Their experimental farms, and fine horses were widely known. They maintained two private race tracks, the largest of which was located where the present Cheektowaga Town Park is today.

The influence of the railroads was evidenced in several ways. One was the creation of the two incorporated villages which lie within the town's borders. The Village of Depew was established by law in 1892. The western, and largest part of the village lies in Cheektowaga, while the balance of it is in Lancaster. It came into being because of the large Gould Coupler Works that was established near Transit Road in Lancaster. The Village of Sloan came into being because of the railroad yards of the D.L. & W. Railroad. Both villages got their names from influential persons connected with the railroads.

Cheektowaga's farmers shipped milk and produce into Buffalo or to the East via the railroads. An 1893 map shows six railroad stations located in central Cheektowaga on the railroads. By the turn of the century, two of the world's largest coal trestles were in the Broadway, Union Road area. These were not abandoned until after World War I. Cheektowaga was noted for its many grade crossings over the four railroad lines. This cut travel from one section of the town to another, making the separate communities more important to their residents. The proximity of Buffalo, Lancaster, Williams-

ville, and Gardenville, all older villages and a city, tended to prevent the rise of one central village of importance in the town.

With the growth of Buffalo's importance, and the establishment of trolley lines in and near to it, Cheektowaga was crossed by two lines which were started in the 1890's and were continued into the 1920's. The Buffalo, Bellevue, and Lancaster Electric Railroad was the first. One could get on a trolley at Buffalo's Main Street, ride out Broadway to the city line, and then across the fields south of Broadway to Union Road and on into Lancaster on the trolley right-of-way which is today Como Park Boulevard. This line made a loop through the Villages of Depew and Lancaster. The second line was the Buffalo and Depew Electric Railway. It started at the city line of Buffalo at Genesee Street and crossed the fields south of Genesee street east into northern Depew, and then south and parallel to Transit Road. Parts of present George Urban Boulevard and the area near Buffalo-Depew Boulevard at Dick Road are that old trolley bed. The advent of the automobile ended the trolley era in Cheektowaga, as it did in many of the towns of Erie County.

It was World War II which turned Cheektowaga from its semi-rural existence into a truly suburban town. In the 1920's Buffalo had chosen its Municipal Airport site along Genesee Street. There were at least four other fields in the near flat terrain of the town. Curtiss Wright Corporation, with the help of the United States government built its large plant next to the Buffalo Airport. American Arms was constructed on Broadway, east of Harlem Road. The huge Gardenville Freight Marshalling yards of the New York Central that had been a part of Cheektowaga for over 25 years, became one of the largest east of the Mississippi, as rail shipments of military supplies and goods of all kinds went across the country. The labor supply for the rapidly expanding manufacturing community of the Niagara Frontier soon outgrew Buffalo and the older parts of the nearby towns. New homes were needed, and the most logical place for them was close to the plants which were being built in and around Buffalo. The building boom, on all levels, hit Cheektowaga! The population grew from 11,923 in 1920 to over 117,000 in 1970.

Relatively inexpensive land, already serviced by sewer districts, especially in northern and western Cheektowaga, attracted developers of all types. Because there was no form of planning within the town structure, Cheektowaga grew "like Topsey." Only in the most recent years has this unplanned development been checked through the establishment of a Town Planning Board and a Master Plan for a town that is already beset by many problems.

The construction of the New York State Thruway across central Cheektowaga from north to south further chopped the town into two large segments, but it brought about a rapid commercial and industrial development which has made the town a very wealthy one in evaluation. With this construction, the County and State built Walden Avenue from Harlem Road east into Lancaster. Here was virgin, undeveloped land for business. The farsightedness of two or three men who had a stake in that area has provided Cheektowaga with a business–commercial complex that is termed by real estate men as the "golden mile" (although it is over three miles). In a period of about fifteen years, during the 1950's and early 1960's, Cheektowaga came to be called, all over New York State, the "Transportation Hub of the Niagara Frontier." The many railroads, major state highways connecting

to the Thruway at toll–free interchanges, plus the expanded air facilities of the Buffalo International Airport have brought prosperity to the town.

With the expanding economy in Cheektowaga, other less noticable changes were coming about. School systems grew by leaps and bounds, as school populations increased. Five of the smaller districts where the building boom was only starting to increase joined together to make the Cheektowaga Central School District No. 1. There were seven Catholic Churches in the town in 1940, all of which had been founded before the turn of the 20th century. There were only five Protestant churches. Today, in comparison, there are 17 Catholic parishes, and 15 Protestant congregations scattered across the town. The George Urban Cheektowaga Town Park was constructed from the old race track area, to be the first of a complex which will ultimately service not only children but adults. The Cheektowaga Public Library System was started in 1962 and has three of its five libraries already in operation. The other two, to come in the early 1970's, will give the town's residents library facilities equal to those of Buffalo or other towns of the county.

These benefits have not come without increasing problems of service. Because of the town's wealth, funds from other governmental units are not often available. The sewer facilities which had been planned for a small population, and then enlarged as needed without overall planning, has been a large problem that the Cheektowaga Town Board still is trying to solve. Police and fire protection have grown with the population.

One of the biggest problems for the people of Cheektowaga has been a lack of leadership in attempting to break down the self interest in the tight communities that have been a part of our heritage during the past 100 years. The influx of new residents from all over the United States has helped. The youth of the newer residents is also being felt in the fact that geographical, ethnic and social lines are slowly being swept away. As these young people learn about their neighbors, their town, its history, and its governmental processes, then deep roots will be established. These roots will give Cheektowaga the pride and stability it had at its birth. Cheektowaga is becoming one of Erie County's suburban towns, which with others, makes Erie County the pride of the Niagara Frontier.

Published by

THE BUFFALO AND ERIE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

in commemoration of

THE ERIE COUNTY SESQUICENTENNIAL

1971

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